

THE IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE ON THE SECURITY OF THE BLACK SEA BASIN

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Abstract. *The Black Sea region over the centuries has played an important geostrategic role in the relations between the great powers. Currently, at the confluence of two universal cultures and religions, the European Christian and the Islamic, and several families of peoples, the Black Sea is a space of both convergence and collision of the interests of the riparian countries, especially those of the Russian Federation. Currently, the Black Sea Region is a strategic fault line between Russia and the NATO alliance. In the post-Cold War era, the Black Sea basin has turned into a climate of deep uncertainty about the potential strategic direction of its riparian states. The East-West divide led to a succession of conflicts that culminated in the all-out invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Russia's war against Ukraine became the most violent and consequence since World War II.*

Since the beginning of the century, Russia has lost its economic, political and military influence in several countries bordering the Black Sea basin, and by seizing Crimea in 2014, the Russian Federation tried to restore its former influence. The unjustified invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in 2022 recalls the precedent of 2014, when Russia occupied part of the sovereign territory of Ukraine by military force. The illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula then allowed the Russian Black Sea fleet to practically strangle the entire region.

The emergence of the Russian-Ukrainian war has its consequences in the Black Sea basin, especially on the security of this region. Thus, by analyzing the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the main consequences on the security of the Black Sea basin will be highlighted.

Keywords: *Black Sea basin, Ukraine, Russian Federation, geopolitical interest, geostrategic interest, geo-economic interest, war, security.*

Introduction

Over the centuries, from a geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic perspective, the importance of the Black Sea has been primarily based on the region's role as a crossroads of former powers and empires (Hellenic, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, Russian). It has simultaneously served as a connection, a border, a buffer zone,

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and a transit area between West and East, as well as between South and North. Additionally, the Black Sea has historically been—and continues to be—a key hub for trade networks and regions rich in energy resources. The Black Sea Basin spans an area of 413,000 km², stretching 1,150 km from west to east and 600 km from north to south (*Maior, Konopliov, 2011*). Furthermore, the Black Sea region is home to a diverse array of cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and religious identities. This heterogeneity is also reflected in the structure, size, and economic orientation of the countries within the region (*ibidem*).

Surrounded by Europe, the Caucasus, and the Anatolian region, the Black Sea Basin is connected to the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean Sea to the south via the Bosphorus Strait and the Sea of Marmara. The Black Sea, as a region, has been historically contested due to its dual role as both a bridge and a border. Its strategic importance is further underscored by its size and the increasing capabilities for power projection, as well as the fact that it is an inland sea with a single outlet to the global ocean—an outlet controlled exclusively by Turkey.

Positioned at the confluence of two major civilizations and religions—European Christianity and Islam—as well as several distinct national groups, the Black Sea serves as both a zone of convergence and a battleground for the interests of the riparian states and various international actors. The geopolitical and security dynamics of the Black Sea region, its geographical positioning, the existing risks and threats to stability, and aspects related to political, economic, and military cooperation are all factors that have drawn increasing attention from the international community, European institutions, and Euro-Atlantic organizations. These considerations have led to a more strategic approach to addressing the region's challenges.

In the context of evolving Euro-Atlantic geopolitical and geostrategic realities—particularly following NATO and EU expansion—the Black Sea Basin has gained recognition as an area of significant geostrategic importance (*Frunzeti, Zodian, 2009*). It is a key intersection of strategic routes that facilitate links between the West and the East, a zone of competition and cooperation among major international actors, and a meeting point of differing socio-economic structures and conflicting value systems.

Since 2004, the Black Sea has been defined as the Eastern border of the EU and NATO, marking a frontier near the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The region also holds substantial economic value due to its maritime energy resources, raw materials, modern and developing industrial capabilities, educated population, and extensive regional and transregional trade (*Frunzeti*).

Due to its geographical position, economic potential, and the escalating Russian-Ukrainian tensions, the Black Sea holds significant geopolitical importance. Numerous security aspects are linked to this region—not only from a military perspective (*following Russia's annexation of Crimea*) but also in terms of energy and economic considerations.

Over the centuries, the geostrategic significance of the Black Sea Basin has been shaped by its dual role as both a connecting bridge and a border, a buffer zone, and a transit corridor between Europe and Asia, lying at the intersection of former powers and empires. Additionally, the Black Sea has served as a crucial hub for trade routes and regions rich in energy resources.

The Black Sea has always been a strategic area for the deployment and mobilization of armed forces, both from defensive and expansionist perspectives. Its unique position between the hydrocarbon reserves of the Caspian Basin and Europe

further enhances its strategic importance. While the opportunity to transfer Caspian oil and gas to European markets promotes economic development and regional prosperity, competition for control over pipelines, waterways, and shipping routes—critical for securing political and economic influence—raises the risk of confrontation not only within the region but on a global scale.

At the same time, the increasing number of transit routes, coupled with the potential for enhanced bilateral cooperation, could lead to redundancy due to excessive transport capacity relative to the available supply of oil and gas (*A 2020 Vision for the Black Sea Region*).

The Security of the Black Sea Basin in the Context of the War in Ukraine

The Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, represents the most significant military conflict in Europe since the end of World War II. Wars of this magnitude—especially the high-intensity conflict unfolding in Ukraine—typically trigger political-military and socio-economic transformations, which, in turn, alter the security landscape.

Given the complexity of the subject, this analysis does not aim to cover all aspects of the ongoing war. However, it will highlight key developments related to the war's impact on illicit drug trafficking. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the protracted conflict have profound long-term implications for regional security and stability. The presence of an active, high-intensity war on the European continent for over two years and eight months—directly affecting Ukraine's immediate neighbor, Moldova—has led to a growing interest in its impact on security, particularly regarding illicit drug trafficking.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has disrupted established trafficking routes, forcing some criminal networks to seek alternative pathways. According to an analysis conducted by the EU Drugs Agency, the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), and Europol—published on January 24, 2024—the European heroin market (the most commonly used illicit opioid) relies on four primary trafficking routes from Afghanistan to Europe: the Balkan, Southern, Caucasus, and Northern routes (*Războiul rusesc împotriva Ucrainei*).

Main Heroin Trafficking Routes to Europe:

- The Balkan Route – Historically the main heroin trafficking corridor from Afghanistan through Iran and Pakistan to Turkey, continuing via Bulgaria, Greece, or the Mediterranean Sea.
- The Southern Route – Transporting heroin through Iran or Pakistan, either via East Africa's coast or the Arabian Peninsula, before reaching Europe.
- The Caucasus Route – Moving heroin from Afghanistan through Iran to Armenia or Azerbaijan, then into Georgia and across the Black Sea to Bulgaria, Romania, or Ukraine.
- The Northern Route – Running from Afghanistan to Tajikistan, then via Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan, before reaching Russia, Ukraine, and ultimately the EU (primarily the Baltic states and Poland) (*EU Drug Market*).

According to the study, the Caucasus route typically involves smuggling heroin on ferries crossing the Black Sea from Georgia to Bulgaria, Romania, and, until recently, Ukraine. Several heroin seizures along this route in recent years confirm that it is used to traffic large quantities of opiates from Iran into Europe via Armenia or Azerbaijan and Georgia. Historically, Ukraine has served as a transshipment and storage hub for heroin

trafficking along both the Northern and Caucasus routes, according to an analysis by the EMCDDA and Europol (*Războiul rusesc împotriva Ucrainei*).

Increased security along Russia's borders with European countries, combined with sanctions against the Russian government and restrictions on trade, has significantly reduced the potential for heroin trafficking from Russia to the EU via the Northern route. However, this decline has led to adaptations in the Caucasus and Northern routes, redirecting heroin flows through Ukraine—particularly via Odesa. Additionally, activity has increased along alternative routes, such as the Balkan and Southern routes (*ibidem*).

The EU Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction has already observed shifts in drug trafficking patterns around the Black Sea and toward other neighboring countries. This change explains the growing concerns of European authorities about drug shipments now passing through the Greek islands and the southern Mediterranean. “We are seeing traffickers attempting to use European ports to establish new supply chains, which could alter the dynamics of criminal networks in Eastern Europe and create new routes into Europe.”

Poland is also emerging as an alternative transit route for heroin moving from Russia through Belarus, potentially replacing the Ukrainian route. However, the reinforcement of border controls with Belarus, including the construction of a border wall, could complicate this new pathway.

The war in Ukraine has also disrupted the trafficking of other illicit substances, such as synthetic opioids and methamphetamines, which were previously transported from Europe to Russia via Ukraine. Since the war began, these routes have shifted toward the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the Baltic states, and Belarus. While the war initially disrupted the illicit drug trade, it has also created new opportunities—particularly for synthetic drugs, which are easier to produce and distribute. The demand for these substances remains high, and the profit margins in war zones are substantial (*La guerre en Ukraine*).

However, the war in Ukraine has also fueled the expansion of organized crime networks and their activities. Human trafficking, drug smuggling, arms trafficking, money laundering, counterfeiting, and the smuggling of tobacco, oil, semiconductors, and spare parts have all intensified. Throughout history, wars have acted as disruptive yet accelerating forces, altering established smuggling routes while simultaneously creating new ones. The war in Ukraine is no exception, particularly as Odesa and its port—once a major hub—remain under siege (*ibidem*).

A United Nations report published on December 22, 2023, highlights that the ongoing conflict has led to an increase in synthetic drug production. Even before the war, the number of amphetamine laboratories in Ukraine was on the rise. In times of chaos, activities that are typically prohibited and prosecuted often flourish, and Ukraine is unlikely to be an exception. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) warns in its annual report that war often creates conditions that facilitate illicit drug production and trafficking, posing a significant long-term risk (*Ukraine: la guerre pourrait profiter*).

Data from the past two to three years indicate that Southeastern Europe has become a critical transit region for illicit trafficking, as evidenced by significant drug seizures at ports in the Adriatic, Aegean, and Black Seas. These ports are emerging as key entry points for Ukraine's cocaine supply. The ports of Constanța in Romania and Varna in Bulgaria have become strategic hubs for both imports and exports to and from Ukraine. However, both have historically struggled with corruption and security issues.

The increased volume of legal trade, combined with inefficient cargo scanning and verification systems, has heightened the vulnerability of ports in the Black Sea region to illicit trafficking.

The war in Ukraine has also fueled the expansion of illicit arms trafficking networks. Even before the Russian invasion, Ukraine was a known center for arms trafficking. However, since the war began, experts have raised serious concerns: thousands of tons of weapons supplied by the United States and the European Union to the Ukrainian military risk falling into the hands of international criminal organizations and terrorist groups. These illicit arms are not limited to small firearms and ammunition but also include advanced weaponry such as Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, which are portable, easy to operate, and capable of shooting down commercial aircraft. Reports indicate that arms stockpiles in eastern Ukraine are being looted (*Guerre en Ukraine*).

Western allies have provided Ukraine with unprecedented military support, as Kyiv continues its resistance against Russian forces, who control large swaths of Eastern and Southern Ukraine. As the conflict persists, there have been growing concerns about black-market sales of NATO-supplied weapons originally intended for Ukrainian forces. The potential for these weapons to fall into the hands of radical groups and terrorist organizations is now a major concern for European governments and the United States. Many fear a repeat of the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, when uncontrolled arms shipments fueled the global illicit arms trade. Similar scenarios have occurred in more recent conflicts, such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to estimates by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, nearly €85 billion in military, financial, and humanitarian aid has been provided to Ukraine since the war began. The European Union has contributed a total of €23.28 billion, including €11.74 billion in bilateral aid and €11.54 billion from joint EU funds. Key contributions include: United Kingdom: €3.7 billion, Poland: €1.8 billion, Germany: €1.4 billion, France: Increased aid from \$1.7 billion to \$2 billion. Additional significant military aid has come from Canada, Norway, Japan, and Australia. The United States remains the largest donor, having provided €49 billion in aid by the end of January 2022, of which €25 billion (56%) was military assistance (*Lombardi*). Furthermore, on April 24, 2024, U.S. President Joe Biden announced an additional \$61 billion arms package for Ukraine, marking the largest single military aid shipment since the war began. This package includes: Harpoon anti-ship missile launchers, Howitzers and artillery ammunition, Anti-tank weapons, HIMARS multiple rocket launchers with a range of 70 kilometers (*Congresul SUA aprobă*).

Despite the intention of strengthening Ukraine's defense, international security experts warn of unintended consequences. Interpol Secretary-General Jürgen Stock cautioned in June 2023 that Western-supplied arms could end up on the global black market, exacerbating international arms trafficking and posing long-term security risks (*Cachinero*).

As the conflict between Russia and Ukraine unfolds, there are various complaints about the black-market sales of many weapons donated by NATO countries to Ukrainian fighters. Indeed, the illegal acquisition by radical and terrorist organizations of weapons originally intended for the defense of Ukraine is currently one of the main concerns for the European political class, but also for the United States government. Therefore, what some consider to be a "military aid spillover" to Ukraine threatens to become a ticking time bomb that no one knows when or where it might explode. With the war in Ukraine, drug and arms trafficking routes are changing, creating new opportunities for traffickers.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has consequences not only for food security and global energy security, but also has a direct impact on drug and arms trafficking routes.

The recent data from Southeastern Europe paints a concerning picture of the region's role in illicit trafficking, with major drug seizures at ports along the Adriatic, Aegean, and Black Seas, such as the ports of Constanța in Romania and Varna in Bulgaria. These ports have become key hubs for goods moving to and from Ukraine, but they face significant issues with corruption and security, making them vulnerable to exploitation by criminal networks. The increasing volume of legitimate trade, coupled with inefficiencies in cargo verification and scanning, has made these ports even more susceptible to illicit activities.

The escalation of illicit arms trafficking, particularly linked to the ongoing war in Ukraine, has raised alarms internationally. While Ukraine was already a known point for arms trafficking prior to the conflict, the situation worsened after Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. Experts warn that the large quantities of military aid supplied by the United States and the European Union to Ukrainian forces—ranging from small arms to advanced weaponry like Stinger anti-aircraft missiles—could fall into the wrong hands, including criminal organizations and terrorist groups. This issue is compounded by the looting of arms stockpiles in eastern Ukraine, which only increases the potential for black-market proliferation.

According to Interpol Secretary-General Jürgen Stock, the risk of these weapons surfacing on the global black market is real. This situation mirrors past crises, such as the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, where arms proliferation contributed to global illicit trade networks. The same concerns extend to other conflicts like those in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On the military assistance front, the sheer scale of aid to Ukraine is unprecedented. As of early 2024, Ukraine had received approximately €85 billion in combined military, financial, and humanitarian support, with the United States contributing the lion's share—€49 billion, of which €25 billion is earmarked for military aid. The European Union, alongside nations like Germany, Poland, and France, also significantly bolstered Ukraine's defense efforts.

However, experts remain concerned about the unintended consequences of such massive military shipments. The flow of sophisticated weaponry could exacerbate global security risks if strict oversight mechanisms are not put in place to prevent unauthorized sales or diversions to radical groups or criminal organizations. The risk of weapons falling into illicit hands, combined with the region's vulnerabilities to trafficking and corruption, underscores the urgent need for tighter security measures and accountability in both the flow of goods and military aid. The significant increase in military aid to Ukraine has undoubtedly bolstered the country's defensive capabilities, but it also raises critical concerns regarding the unintended consequences of such massive shipments. The flow of sophisticated weaponry—ranging from anti-tank weapons to HIMARS multiple rocket launchers—has the potential to exacerbate global security risks if robust oversight mechanisms are not implemented. Experts warn that, without stringent tracking systems and effective monitoring, weapons intended for Ukrainian defense forces could be diverted to unauthorized groups, including radical organizations or criminal networks.

The threat of arms diversion is not a new issue. Historical precedents, such as the Yugoslav Wars and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, have demonstrated how uncontrolled flows of military aid can lead to the proliferation of weapons, fueling illicit arms markets and contributing to prolonged instability. The concern today is that the advanced military hardware being supplied to Ukraine could end up in the hands of actors

with far-reaching and destabilizing effects, not only within the region but across the globe. This includes the potential for weapons to reach terrorist organizations, insurgent groups, and transnational criminal gangs, which could use them to further their own agendas and undermine regional peace efforts.

The potential diversion of weapons supplied to Ukraine, especially as the conflict evolves and the frontlines shift, poses a significant challenge for both Ukrainian authorities and international partners. The growing concerns about unauthorized sales and transfers are compounded by the vulnerabilities in the Black Sea region. As we have seen in recent years, the region is already a hotspot for illicit trafficking, and the ongoing war has made monitoring and controlling the flow of goods even more difficult. The proximity of conflict zones and the subsequent lack of security measures in certain areas have created opportunities for organized crime to thrive.

To mitigate these risks, there is an urgent need for stricter regulations and oversight mechanisms surrounding the transfer and tracking of military aid. Efforts to track weapons should include both physical and digital monitoring, ensuring that each shipment can be traced at every stage of its journey. This would involve not only close collaboration with the European Union and NATO, but also with international organizations such as Interpol and the United Nations, to create a coordinated global response to weapon proliferation.

Moreover, it is essential that the states of the Black Sea region—such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey—enhance their cooperation in combating illicit arms trafficking. These countries play a pivotal role in controlling the movement of goods across the region, and their active involvement in tracking arms shipments, conducting joint operations, and enforcing border security measures is critical. Increased surveillance of key transit routes, such as the Bosphorus Strait, and bolstering border control efforts in maritime and land transport corridors are vital to preventing the diversion of military supplies.

The risks associated with military aid diversion are not limited to weapons alone; they also extend to the trafficking of other illicit goods, such as narcotics and human trafficking. The presence of sophisticated weapons in the hands of criminal organizations could further fuel these illegal activities, creating a more dangerous and unstable environment in the Black Sea region. This interconnected web of criminal enterprises underscores the need for a holistic approach to security, where both arms control and the fight against trafficking are addressed in tandem.

Furthermore, the accountability of arms suppliers, particularly Western nations, is of paramount importance. Countries like the United States and United Kingdom, which are major contributors to Ukraine's defense efforts, must ensure that their support does not inadvertently fuel global insecurity. This requires thorough due diligence in the arms export process, including vetting recipients and recipients' intermediaries, to ensure that weapons do not fall into the wrong hands. Additionally, the international community must work together to strengthen legal frameworks that prevent the unauthorized sale or transfer of military goods. These frameworks should incorporate stringent reporting, auditing, and compliance measures to ensure transparency and accountability at all levels of the supply chain.

In conclusion, the massive scale of military aid flowing into Ukraine, while necessary for its defense, also presents substantial risks that must be addressed. The diversion of advanced weaponry into illicit channels is a pressing concern that could destabilize the region and beyond. To prevent such outcomes, there must be a concerted

effort to implement rigorous oversight measures, enhance regional cooperation, and ensure that military aid does not contribute to the growth of global illicit arms markets. The consequences of failing to do so could have far-reaching implications, not only for the security of Ukraine but for global peace and stability.

Conclusions

The ongoing confrontation between the Russian Federation and Western powers, particularly since the end of 2021, has dramatically reshaped the security landscape in the Black Sea region. This conflict, centered around the war in Ukraine, has not only escalated tensions between Russia and NATO but has also had significant ramifications on the proliferation of illicit activities, particularly in drug and arms trafficking. The geopolitical dynamics in the Black Sea have created a volatile environment, where the military and political crisis in Ukraine directly influences regional security, with far-reaching consequences.

At present, the Black Sea has become a critical point of interest for both military strategy and illicit activities. The region is witnessing a dual reality: while there is an ongoing process of reinforcing the regional security architecture as part of the Euro-Atlantic area, there is also an intensification of security challenges due to the war in Ukraine. This war has led to the disruption of established control over parts of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, opening the door to more transnational criminal activities, including the trafficking of drugs and weapons.

One of the most concerning aspects of the current situation is the impact of the conflict on the flow of illicit goods across the region. Ukraine and its neighboring countries have long been identified as significant transit routes for both arms and narcotics, but the war has created new vulnerabilities. Ukrainian ports, such as Odessa on the Black Sea, have become increasingly difficult to monitor and secure due to the ongoing hostilities, making them prime entry points for illegal shipments. The collapse of regulatory oversight in conflict zones allows organized criminal groups to exploit these gaps, fueling regional and global trafficking networks.

Moreover, the proximity of Russia to the Black Sea and its involvement in the conflict has complicated the situation even further. The Russian Federation itself has been accused of playing a role in facilitating illicit arms and drug trade, either through direct involvement or by turning a blind eye to such activities as part of its broader strategic objectives. The use of the Black Sea as a logistical corridor for the movement of illicit goods, especially to and from countries in the Middle East and Europe, has become an alarming trend. The ongoing war in Ukraine has disrupted the region's security architecture, allowing for the further entrenchment of these criminal activities.

In response to these challenges, there is a growing recognition among the Black Sea riparian states of the need to strengthen regional cooperation and security measures. The complexity of the situation demands a multifaceted approach, involving diplomatic, military, and law enforcement efforts. Strengthening border controls, improving surveillance of key transit points such as the Bosphorus Strait, and enhancing intelligence-sharing between regional partners are all critical steps to curb the flow of illicit drugs and arms.

The role of NATO and the European Union is also crucial in this context. Both organizations have shown increasing interest in stabilizing the Black Sea region, not just from a military standpoint, but also in terms of countering illicit activities that threaten regional stability. NATO's presence in the region, along with the EU's support for

Ukraine and its neighbors, is intended to both reinforce defense capabilities and create a robust framework for combating organized crime. These efforts must be accompanied by targeted sanctions, capacity-building initiatives for law enforcement, and closer cooperation with Interpol and other international bodies.

Given the intricate web of political, economic, and security dynamics at play, it is clear that regional security in the Black Sea is no longer just about traditional military defense. The war in Ukraine has highlighted the vulnerability of the region to the expansion of illicit trafficking networks, which, in turn, exacerbate the challenges of maintaining peace and stability. As such, combating these illegal activities is not only a matter of securing borders but also of ensuring that the Black Sea does not become a safe haven for criminal enterprises that undermine the efforts of the international community to promote peace and security.

In conclusion, the Black Sea has emerged as a critical zone of both conflict and illicit trade, where the war in Ukraine serves as a catalyst for the intensification of these dangerous activities. To address these challenges, it is essential for the riparian states of the region to enhance their collective efforts in securing their borders, improving maritime monitoring, and working together to dismantle trafficking networks. By doing so, they can contribute to the broader goal of regional stability and security, reinforcing the Black Sea's role within the Euro-Atlantic framework while simultaneously combating the rise of transnational criminal activities that threaten both regional and global peace.

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